



Rethinking Literary Historiography Across South Asia and the Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract— This paper attempts to investigate the process of writing of the literary history in the context of South Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In doing so, it problematizes the process of canon formation by raising a number of questions. What are the critical frameworks and methodological tools involved? What are the gaps in the formation of the literary canon? What roles did caste, gender and class play in the process of writing of literary texts and their incorporation into the canon? The paper also problematizes the influence of the Western models of literary historiographies over the existing literary historiographies across Asia and the Indian subcontinent. It attempts to probe into the possible points of departure that provide us with the alternative frameworks from the ones provided to us by the Western model. Can we look at the literary history, alternatively, rather than classifying texts according to chronology or genres as is conventionally done? The paper attempts to suggest some of the frameworks in order to undo the influence of western model. Tracing the oral transmission of texts while highlighting numerous folkloric motifs prevalent in the canonical texts particularly focusing on the Sufi-Bhakti traditions. Another alternative is adopting a dynamic approach by incorporating new concepts such as “margin-centrism”, “multicultural corridors” and “pluralistic epistemologies” (206), as Prof. T.S. Satyanath puts it. His approach would be to reconceptualize cultural contacts as cultural re-negotiations which “nullifies the effects of imperialistic influence model of comparison” (208). Such an approach could dismantle the status of literary history as a grand narrative and propose alternative approaches.



Keywords— literary canon, literary historiography, margin-centrism, multicultural corridors, pluralistic epistemologies, grand narrative.

I. INTRODUCTION

Prof. Douwe Fokkema, an eminent literary historian from the Netherlands, in his essay, ‘Why Literary Historiography?’, expresses his concern regarding the shift in literary studies from historiography to criticism. He argues that the reason behind the crisis of literary historiography is that it adheres to either of the two extreme positions, i.e. either conforming to “positivist determinism” (39) or remaining spell-bound by the uniqueness of the text. The way out of this cul-de-sac, this point of saturation, he opines, is to choose certain common goals which provide the different “parameters for writing histories including literary histories” (40). Conventionally, Fokkema argues, this common goal has been provided by the “romantic,

nationalistic perspective” (37), which has become obsolete. Now, the task of literary historiographer is to discover new goals, new concepts that suture the process of literary historiography from a post-colonial perspective, as an activity of decolonising the discourse itself. This is where this paper intervenes. Where Fokkema builds a case in favour of literary historiography, by asking the question ‘why literary historiography?’ while majorly limiting himself to the first world literary phenomena, I would like to put forth an equally important question i.e. ‘how literary historiography?’ How can we rethink literary historiography in the context of South Asia and the Indian subcontinent? I intend to make a case in favour of why there is a need to *rethink* literary historiography with an appropriate approach when it is applied to the South Asian

cultural context so that it doesn't become a "metanarrative" in itself, to employ the term used by French Poststructuralist literary theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard. This is where the approach of looking at literary history from the lens of a suitable conceptual framework becomes important.

II. METHOD AND DISCUSSION

The discipline of literary history, states Sisir Kumar Das, an eminent Indian literary historiographer, has been under severe attack in the west during the last few decades. The reason for such an attack, he opines, is a failure of the historical method to develop a critical framework appropriate for dealing with the works of literature. Another reason that he gives is the general tendency of merging the literary histories into a general history which leads to a reduction of the literary works to either "source material of social history or to a species of knowledge" (Das 12). The possible reason behind this merger is that there is a great confusion about what exactly is the purpose of literary history and how is that purpose distinct from that of history in general. The purpose becomes significant when it comes to applying theoretical approaches to it. As Prof. Fokkema states, whom Das quotes, the literary historian has to have a clarity about the areas he wants to work in, since his purpose would decide what kind of theoretical approach would work for him. Commenting on the relationship between history and literary history, Das puts, "literary history being a part of a general history can hardly ignore it" (12). He validates Wallek and Warren's two approaches to the study of literary history i.e. the intrinsic and the extrinsic approach. Where the intrinsic approach would comprise of "an internal history- a story of development explainable without any reference to any non-literary phenomenon" (Das 12), the extrinsic approach would take into account "the external history- an account of forms and themes as created by a community and how they have been replaced by another set of forms and themes" (Das 13). This is how Das draws the link as well as the distinction between history and literary history.

Similarly, another eminent Indian literary historiographer, Prof. GN Devy, in his essay 'History and Literary History', discusses in detail the relation between the two. Devy argues that there are number of commonalities in the origin of history and literary history. Devy argues that history emerged as a "discipline" only when it became "the basis for ideological rhetoric" (5). Whoever initiated the documentation of history, be it revolutionary intellectuals, or Napoleon Bonaparte, or the white colonizers, did it with the purpose of power-acquisition. The story of institutionalization of literary

history is not too different, be it in the context of Europe or that of India. When literary history became part of the curriculum in colleges and universities in India, it became instrumental in reifying the already existing social divisions on the basis of class, caste, gender and language (Devy 5).

Devy further goes on to highlight the role of literary history, which he calls "an apparatus of canon formation" (5), in the process of sketching out "the boundaries of fields of literary production in terms of what is socially acceptable or unacceptable" (5). He makes it clear that "literary history directly reflects the values of the society in which the historian lives, for which he writes" (5). Canon, according to him, is an apparatus for justifying the authority's use of power. What Devy establishes here is the fact that the writing of literary history is never a politically innocent and socially innocuous act. To substantiate this point, he alludes to ancient Indian linguist Panini, who comments on the canonical language saying, "it is the community of the learned, the *shishtha*, that decides what is good in language. And it is their language ability that decides who is learned" (5,6). Panini's aphorism highlights not only the circuitous nature of the logic of canon formation but also cues towards the politics of exclusion based on the social rank and linguistic expertise.

This reminds me of an episode that occurs in the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*, about a literary contest (*Sashatrartha*) that takes place between the renowned scholar Acharya Vandin and a poor Brahmin differently-abled boy of mere nine years of age, Ashtavakra, who was born with eight limbs in his body. When Ashtavakra tries to enter the court of king Janaka in order to challenge Acharya Vandin for *sashtrartha*, he is stopped by the guard. On being stopped at the entrance due to his age, he states, "(t) rue growth cannot be inferred from the mere development of the body, as the growth of the knots of the Salmali tree cannot signify its age. That tree is called full-grown which although slender and short, beareth fruits. But that which does not bear fruits, is not considered as grown." (Ray 399). His rhetorical skills and knowledge of the Vedas impresses the king who gives him permission to attend the sacrifice. There he defeats Vandin in the literary contest and is taken as Guru by the King. Ashtavakra later goes on to write an important literary and philosophical work, expounding on the unity of the Supreme Being, known as *Ashtavakra Gita* or *Ashtavakra Samhita*. The reason behind bringing up this reference was to raise a number of questions about the politics involved in the writing of literary history. Firstly, the question arises, had Ashtavakra not been born a Brahmin but rather if he was someone belonging to 'lower caste', would he be given a chance to prove his excellence? We have numerous such examples throughout history where such attempts have been

truncated, Eklavya and Karna are well known examples. Hence, caste provides us with one of the alternatives to look at literary history. Even a celebrated text like *Mahabharata* offers us numerous possibilities to deconstruct it from the angle of caste. Karna, for example, was a *Suta putra*—someone belonging to the Suta caste, is something that is well known. But if one goes to investigate, who actually were the Sutas, some fascinating facets of history would emerge. Sutas, as GN Devy discusses, in his essay, ‘The Conventions of Literary History’, were the illegitimate progeny of the Kshatriyas who were born of their extra marital affairs with the women of different castes. These Sutas would do odd jobs in the court like they would become counsellors, charioteers or bards. Interestingly, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, two of the most celebrated texts of the Indian subcontinent, were composed by the Sutas is something that is often ignored by the critics. Similarly, we could deconstruct these texts from the lens of caste, class and genders.

One significant point that Devy brings up in his essay ‘The Conventions’, is the absence of any exclusive criterion for the classification of ancient Indian literature. Though for convenience, he classifies it into five categories namely- Suta literature, Mantra literature, Shastra, Akshara and Prakrit literature, with an additional category for Tamil reading people called Sangam literature, these canons cannot be classified on the basis of temporal chronology due to absence of any specific time of their emergence. Time was understood as fictional time which seeks to combine myth and history and most of these literatures claim to have a trans-historical, transcendental importance. Another reason could be that a number of canons like the Suta literature had their origin in folk or oral traditions. For a long time, these texts were orally transmitted.

Some of the challenges faced of literary historiography when applied to the Indian context are discussed by the Indian literary critic Sujit Mukherjee. “The conventions of literary historiography in India”, he states, “have demanded that each developed language should concern itself only with literary works in that language” (8). This approach, according to him, leads to the problem of splitting of our literary heritage on the one hand and the danger of becoming reductive to the extent of undervaluing certain features and over-emphasising others also looms. Mukherjee puts this approach to test by applying the same to the works of Tulsidas. He poses this question, how would a literary historian, working with the organising principle of “ascending order of magnitude” of characteristic features of a poet, regard Tulsidas? Tulsidas is a great poet of medieval India, holding a high stature in Hindi poetry and simultaneously a great poet of Indian literature. Mukherjee answers this question by stating, “[t]o call him a poet of

Hindi could be as inaccurate as it would be incomplete to call him a poet of Avadhi” (9). Therefore, he advocates the need of an alternative mode of literary history, one which re-evaluates our conventional understanding of our literary past. To reformulate, an approach by which, “we can learn to recognize a literary culture not merely by the literary texts but also as an outcome of various other factors operating at that time” (Mukherjee 9). One such approach could be examining the way in which the Bhakti movement interacts with Hindi and Avadhi literary traditions.

Another significant point that Mukherjee develops, is about the forms- how forms keep travelling from one language to another. When we look closely at the cultural contacts and how forms travelled along these contacts, one important observation that comes up, is that it is not always the bigger form that influences the smaller forms. We have seen, for instance, Prakrit literary forms influencing Sanskrit literature. Similarly, we find out that many literary forms grew out of folk forms. One great example of this is Sufi saint Shah Abdul Latif’s narrative poem ‘Sasui Punhoon’, which is based on a folk tale. It uses Punjabi folk musical tradition called ‘*Rasalu*’ form, the thirty *surs*, in which the poem is composed, are taken from the Nath Yogi tradition, again a folk tradition. Latif’s poetry is composed in *wae* i.e. written in the *Kaifi* form, which comprise of eight lines sung by two people along with Tambura, a folk musical instrument. Hence, literary forms often travel and influence each other, just like cultures do. The task of literary historiographers is to trace such literary journeys in its free-spiritedness and not try to straightjacket them into rigid genre-based classifications provided to us by the western model.

When one ventures upon writing a literary history of cultures like South Asian or countries like India, one problem that a literary historian comes across is finding an appropriate framework that can “accommodate not only the diverse literary traditions existing in the country but also the complexities of its multilingualism” (Das 1) as S K Das puts it, in the ‘Prologue’ of his book, *A History of Indian Literature*. In such a scenario, the mode of identification of literature can’t be solely linguistic as is the western convention. There is a need to include some other parameters to accommodate the “changes in the geographical distribution of a language (that) can lead to the emergence of diverse literatures within that language” (Das 1), since the “texts are not only interrelated and often interdependent, but also a part of the total history of the community which creates them” (Das 2). As AK Ramanujan demonstrates in his essay ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’, how various tellings of *Ramayana* travelled across the Southeast Asian countries through land and the sea trade routes and got intricately mixed within their

cultural matrix. This transmission was not unidirectional as along with material transaction, literary and cultural transmission would also take place from both the sides. Similarly, Prof. T.S. Satyanath discusses in his essay, 'Understanding South Asia: South-East Asia Cultural Contacts', while carrying out a comparative study of sculptural and literary traditions of the *Panchatantra* tales in India and Indonesia, problematises the available studies based on the "influence" and "diffusion model" of comparison (Satyanath 206). Such an approach, according to Satyanath, worked under the influence of "colonial modernity" of "conceiving the world in terms of binary oppositions and logocentric constructions" (209). Even Devy offers a similar insight when he puts it, "primarily canon and nation were two goals of European literary historiography" (Devy 6). Satyanath's approach is a dynamic one- incorporating new concepts of "marginocentrism", "multicultural corridors" and "pluralistic epistemologies" (206). His approach would reconceptualise cultural contacts as cultural re-negotiations which "nullifies the effects of imperialistic influence model of comparison" (208). Such an approach deconstructs the status of literary history as metanarrative and comes up with alternative approaches. One such turn, which Prof Satyanath emphasizes upon is a spatial turn. The comparison is not done strictly at a national level, though he is doing a comparative study of two nations. In fact, it is done at a sub-regional level, involving the political dynasties and their patronage to the poets and trade contacts. By doing this, he is also advocating the need to "blur the national literary traditions and instead go for specific regional traditions that are redefined in terms of medieval cultural categories rather than modern ones (213). His approach is more driven towards creating a "centrifugal (diversifying and vernacularizing)" as against the "centripetal (unifying and cosmopolitan) process" (219). Such studies show us a path and offers a possibility of approaching the discipline of literary historiography from alternative critical frameworks.

III. CONCLUSION

Literary historiography has been given a lot of attention from people on two ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, lie people like Prof Fokkema, who are extremely defensive about the discipline of literary historiography to the extent of becoming nostalgic about it. Where the anxiety expressed by Prof Fokkema regarding a potential threat to the discipline of literary historiography is not invalid, but his fundamental argument still revolves around the western approach of seeing things in binaries. Here, he creates a binary of literary historiography and that of critical theory. Some of the nativist scholars, on the other hand, have taken

another extreme position by calling the whole idea of writing a literary historiography as a western construct. This paper has attempted to steer through a middle path, by providing a sort of mediation, which tries to accommodate the anxieties expressed from both the sides. The paper takes a third position, which is closer to a Postmodernist and a Postcolonial position, realising the need for the empire to write back and in doing so, subvert and register its resistance. The paper discusses some of the alternatives provided to us by people like GN Devy, who is firm in his conviction that literary historiography is "an involved interdisciplinary enterprise" (10). Similarly, Das stresses the need to develop a suitable critical framework to write a literary history. Mukherjee advocates the need to address the issues of multilingualism and incorporation of folk forms in the literary history. Prof. Satyanath shows us a path, through his study, how to dismantle the western discursive hegemony and do a trans-regional study from a pluralistic perspective. I have argued in favour of the conceptual framework as being one of the possible alternatives for writing literary history from a postcolonial perspective, as a practice of decolonising the discourse. There is a historical necessity to look for alternative ways of approaching the literary texts. Since, concepts are always in the process of becoming, by taking concepts as our point of departure or point of enquiry, we could look at the in-between spaces, the unformed spaces in order to reconfigure things.

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